Less is more with this Ross gem

BY P.J. BREMIER
PHOTOS BARBARA RIES
Catherine Wagner and Loretta Gargan weren’t looking for a house to buy when they serendipitously followed a lead from a newspaper ad three years ago.

But as the San Francisco couple peeked through the fence at the diminutive Ross home they now call the Shack, they “knew it was something special,” Wagner says. “We could see the potential.”

Not everyone might have had the vision, but Wagner, a visual artist with pieces in several top American museums, and Gargan, principal of Loretta Gargan Landscape + Design, appreciated the site, the mountain views, the box canyon microclimate and the rare old-growth wood that clad the 690-square-foot home.

Originally an auxiliary dwelling for a now-divided larger property, the forlorn house had been rented out over the years and lost its charm. Whatever garden there once was had been buried in overgrowth.

“The ceiling was so low inside that you could touch it,” Wagner says, and as much as she and Gargan could see the home’s inner beauty, they kept uttering to each other, “It’s such a shack!”

Undaunted, they purchased it as a second home, and after stripping away the false ceiling and the cosmetic walls that made the space feel dark and cramped, they discovered a gem waiting to be rediscovered.

“Once we crawled into the attic and saw that the ceiling was old-growth vertical-grain Douglas fir, we realized that it needed to be the real roofline,” Wagner says. And the exterior planks are old-growth redwood in 16-inch-wide by 30-foot lengths. You can’t buy wood like that anymore. We knew we were going to keep the envelope of the house as original as possible.”

Charmed by the original fireplace—handmade of Sonoma stone by one of the home’s previous occupants—they knew they had to keep that, too. “It’s idiosyncratic and there’s nothing symmetrical about it. It reminds me of a Philip Guston painting,” Wagner says.

The duo infused the interior with a minimalist aesthetic. The walls are gallery-white, the surfaces clean except for deliberate patches of art, the furnishings high-end but uncomplicated.

Friend and East Bay master builder Paul Discio located local fullen trees and custom-milled wood for the home, creating the fireplace mantel out of a black acacia tree from Berkeley; the floors with elm trees from Tilden Park, and the bedroom door with a Monterey cypress from Golden Gate Park.

Gargan played with natural light in the bath, using a skylight and long frosted window. “I wanted to make the bathroom as luminous
OPPOSITE: The exterior plantings chosen by Loretta Gargan include native grasses. This page from 1091 Catherine Wagner and Loretta Gargan: The Santa Ana stone fireplace is prominent architectural element from exterior vantage point.

ARCHITECTURE | Fieldman Architecture and Paul Discorethe Edge
CONSTRUCTION | Joe Deen Construction
INTERIOR DESIGN | Loretta Gargan Landscape + Design
CABINETRY | Cracker Jack Arte
LIGHTING | H.E. Banker & Associates Lighting Design
LANDSCAPE DESIGN | Loretta Gargan Landscape + Design
LANDSCAPE INSTALLATION | Paul McGovern Landscapes and Groundbreaking Landscapes
as possible but still have privacy," she says. The window transforms into a living mural during the day, when it filters in the soft blues and greens of the plants outside. She lined the bathroom walls with large-scale matte Italian porcelain tile that reduced the number of grout lines. "I like the look," Gargan says. "It's calming."

In the kitchen, she worked closely with San Rafael cabinetmaker Cracker Jack Arts to ensure that everything was as efficient as a ship's galley. "I wanted ample storage and, because the kitchen is open to the living room, I didn't want anything (stored) to be out in view."
So every space, even the front of the bar, had to be functional. Clever Häfele hardware allows for a pull-out four-unit recycling center, an irregularly configured corner cabinet, and a drawer near the stove that converts into an extra counter for plating of food.

Design choices also had to complement the adjacent living room. The Liebherr refrigerator is tall, but not deep, so it’s flush with the rare Jasper Bunsen countertops and, like the Bosch dishwasher, is ultra-quiet and energy-efficient, and its door could accept the wood paneling matching the cabinets for a seamless look. Onda stools by Studio Studios provide extra seating. In the living room, a library table doubles as a dining table and seats 12 when guests come over in winter. Warm-weather dinner parties spill out into the garden, where outdoor tables and a barbecue await.

Entertaining here is surprisingly easy and guests often include artists and celebrated chefs such as Coi restaurateur Daniel Patterson, who cooked at the Shack last summer. “They don’t mind coming out (to Ross) at all,” Wagner adds, smiling. “The Shack is all about having friends and family and everyone feels welcome.”
CLOCKWISE FROM LOWER LEFT: The bathroom features natural light with large frosted windows; the kitchen is designed for efficiency and is open to the living room; living room's focal point is the original fireplace made of Sonoma stone.
The garden is part of that experience. The goal was to create areas of enjoyment—places to read, garden or entertain. "We get amazing sun in the garden," Wagner says. "Often, in the winter, it feels like we're in Palm Springs, and a little patio that looks (out) to Mount Baldy catches the last light of the day."

Gargan chose native grasses and pollinator-attracting plants for this area, but also hebes, vegetables and potted citrus. The couple kept an antique olive tree being used as an arbor by climbing white roses, planted three blooming cherry trees and created a trio of terraces.

"We just feel so lucky that we found this place," Wagner reflects. "It's our little hideaway. We thought of it as a shack at first but as we worked on it, 'the shack' became a loving term. It's such a warm and inviting home that, from the moment we park (the car), we relax."